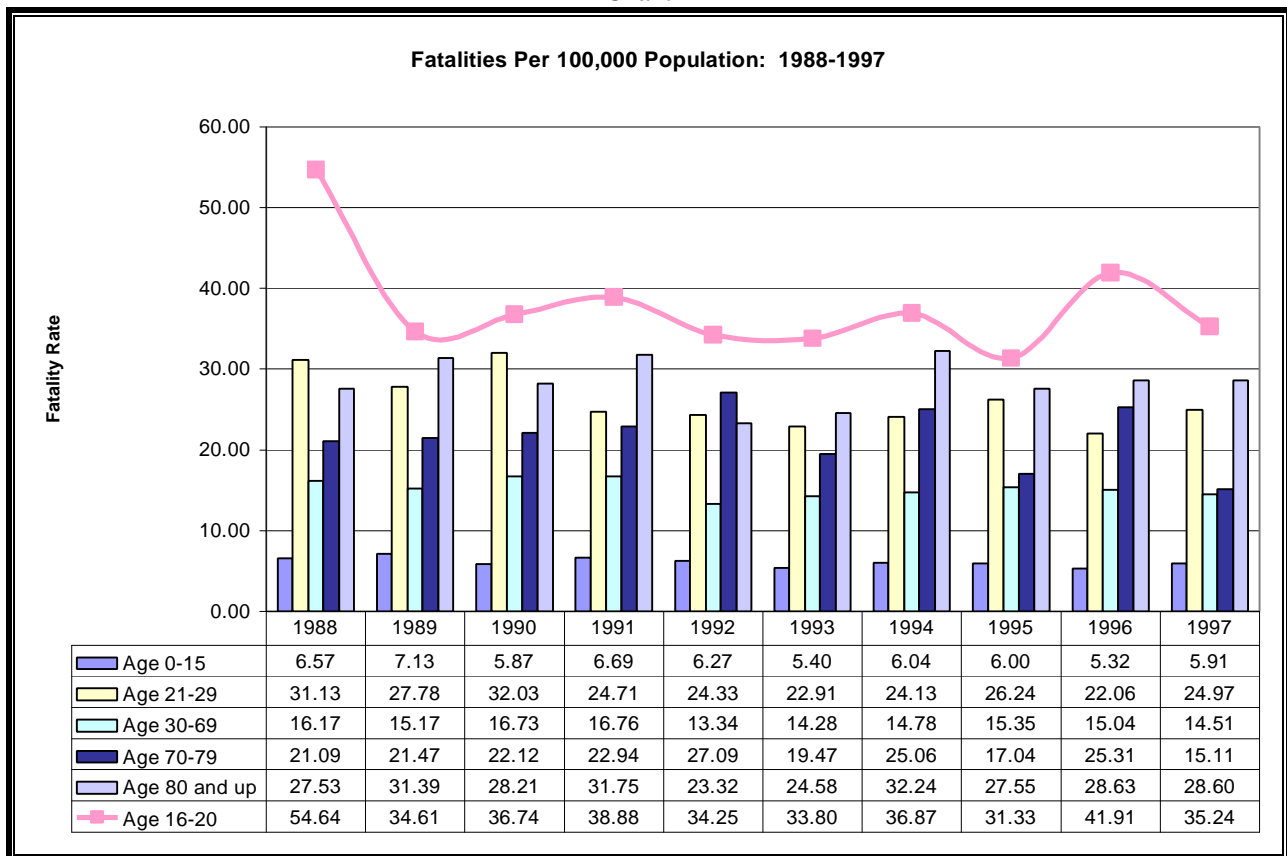


Indiana's Teenage Driver Fatalities: A Parent's Worst Nightmare

It's a typical Wednesday evening and the 6:00 p.m. news is about to begin; that's when you realize that your 16-year-old son, Jeremy, has yet to come home from basketball practice. The leading story on the local news is of a tragic crash that resulted in 2 individuals being transported to the hospital. However, the victims' identities are being withheld pending notification of their families. It is a news story you have heard numerous times, and for a fleeting moment your thoughts rest on the victims and their families; suddenly your phone rings—it is a nurse from the county hospital informing you that Jeremy was the driver involved in the crash. She requests that you proceed to the hospital immediately. Upon your arrival, you are told that Jeremy lost control of the car while travelling at a high rate of speed. As a result, he failed to negotiate his way through a dangerous curve; both Jeremy and his best friend, Tim, were killed when the car rolled over several times before coming to a stop down a steep embankment.

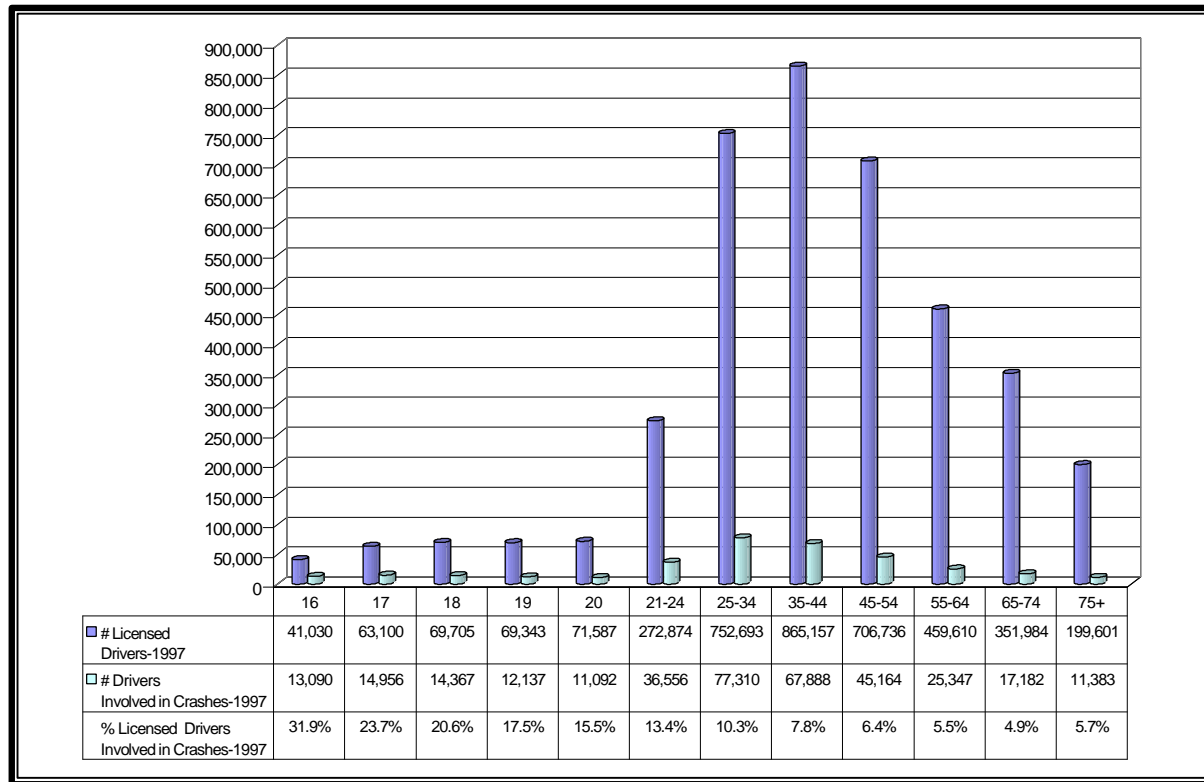
Tragically, similar stories such as this happen far too often. In 1997 alone, of the 940 traffic fatalities in Indiana, 209, or 22.2% involved a driver between 16-20 years of age¹. Of these 209 drivers 16-20 years of age, 95 died as a result of the crash. However, this age group represents only 8.0% of our state's licensed drivers but were involved in 15.5% of the total fatal crashes for 1997. Motor vehicle fatality rates among 16-20 year-olds have continued to remain the highest of all age categories for the last 10 years (see chart #1). Although there was a small degree of improvement from 1996, the fatality rate for the younger driver is still exceedingly higher than all other age groups.

Chart 1



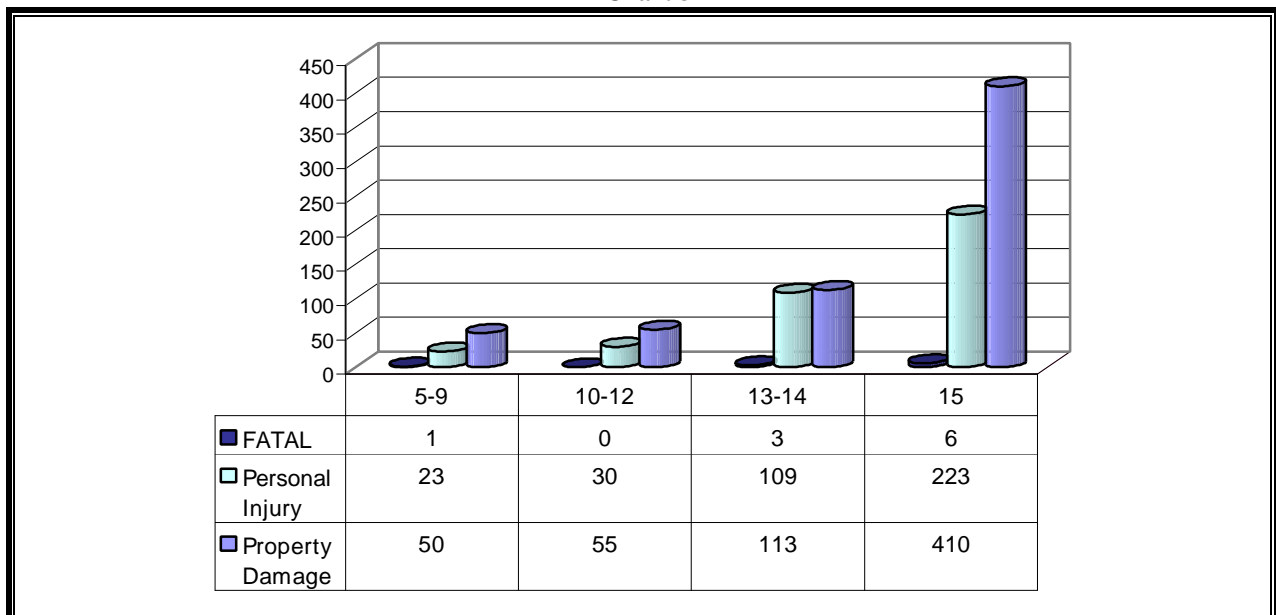
Moreover, 65,642 drivers age 16-20 were involved in a motor vehicle crash in Indiana during 1997. This represents 17.5% of the total number of drivers in crashes that year. Of those 65,642 drivers, a 16 or 17 year-old was behind the wheel 42.7% of the time. Generally speaking, nearly one-third of all 16-year-old licensed drivers and almost one-fourth of all 17-year-old licensed drivers represent a driver involved in a crash during 1997 (see chart #2).

Chart 2



Also startling are the statistics of children between the ages of 5-15 years as drivers of motor vehicles involved in crashes. Another 10 fatalities, 385 personal injuries, and 628 incidents of property damage resulted from vehicles being driven by these children in 1997 (see chart #3). The important element to remember with regard to this data is the fact that these crashes involve child drivers—not of legal age to drive. In reviewing the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports for 1997, a reported 440 children between the ages of 11-15 years old were arrested for motor vehicle theft throughout the State of Indiana.²

Chart 3

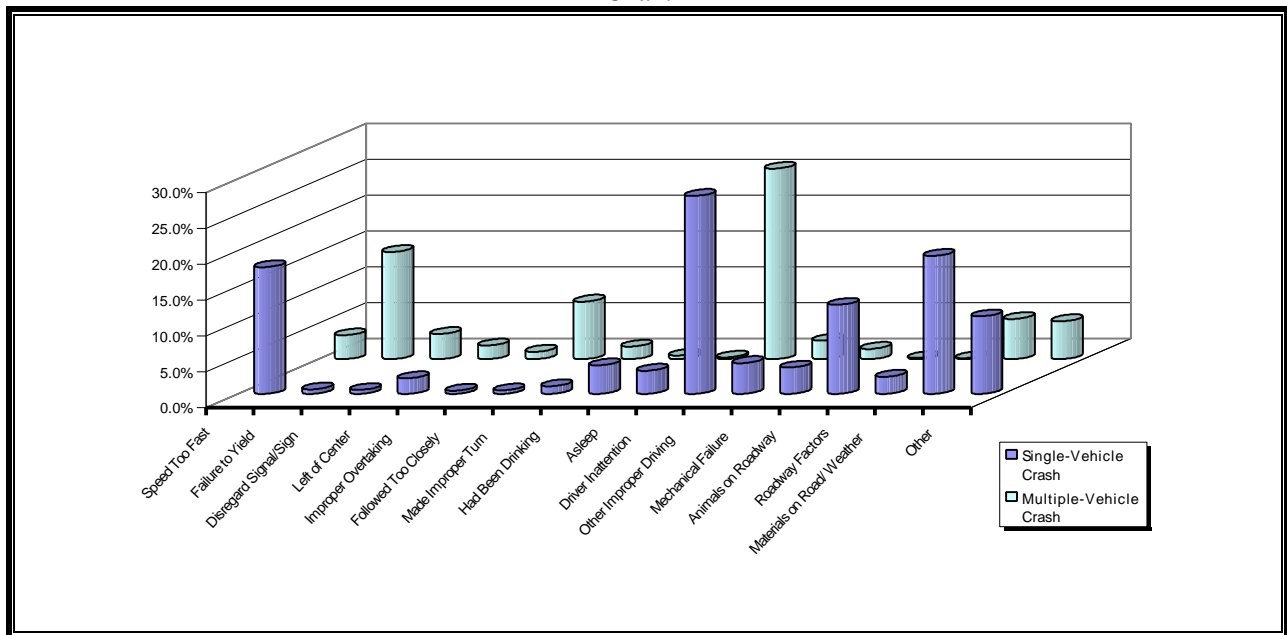


In analyzing the number of crashes involving our young people, it is important to understand when, where, and how these crashes occur. Jeremy and Tim were travelling home from basketball practice around 5:00 p.m. when their fatal crash occurred. In reviewing the time of day when the majority of crashes involving teenage drivers took place in 1997, the data revealed that 32.5% of them were between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 5:59 p.m. Likewise, 27.7% of crashes involving 18-20 year-olds and 28.8% of crashes involving underage drivers (younger than 16 years of age) happened during the same timeframe. This time period encompasses the end of the school day as well as the beginning of rush hour for most communities, resulting in an onslaught of motor vehicle traffic on the roadways. Thus, it is reasonable that the greatest number of crashes involving a younger, less experienced driver occurs during those hours.

A review of the crash data revealed that 84.2% of 16-17 year-old driver fatalities and 78.5% of 18-20 year-old driver fatalities occurred in a rural area. However, for drivers sustaining serious to moderate injuries after a crash, the picture is somewhat different. For 16-17 year-old injured drivers, 53.1% crashed in a rural area, but for 18-20 year-old injured drivers, 54.8% crashed in an urban area. To better discern why a crash occurs in a given situation or location, driving behaviors and patterns need to be considered. Jeremy lost control of his car due to his inability to control it while entering a curve at an excessive rate of speed. Losing control of the vehicle can be attributed to a lack of defensive driving techniques and excessive speed falls under the category of Aggressive Driving. The investigating officer identifies aggressive driving as the cause of a crash on the crash report by using the following circumstances: speed, failure to yield, disregarding stop sign/traffic signal, improper passing/turn, and following too closely. A review of the cause of crashes occurring between 1993-1997 involving drivers 16-20 years old discovered that an average of 24.0% were involved in a crash that was reported to have been caused by aggressive driving. Moreover, this rate is increasing an average of 0.6% per year across all Indiana counties for this age group.

The vehicular contributing circumstance is an important factor in ascertaining why younger drivers (less than 21 years of age) are involved in higher rates of crashes than older, more experienced drivers. In chart #4 below, note that for single-vehicle crashes, the prevalent contributing circumstances were driver inattention (27.6%), materials on road/weather (19.2%), and speed too fast (17.6%). Numerous reasons can be attributed to a young driver's inattention to the roadway, such as passenger interruptions and/or conversation, loud music, eating while driving, etc. Crashes attributed to materials on road/weather could indicate that young drivers are more willing to risk driving in snow, ice, or water covered roads or that they do not adjust their driving pattern to the road condition due to their inexperience in such situations. For multiple-vehicle crashes the prevalent contributing circumstances were driver inattention (26.6%), failure to yield (15.0%), and materials on road/weather (5.6%).

Chart 4



In 1997, there were 9,544 alcohol-related crashes in the State of Indiana, resulting in 214 fatalities. Of these crashes, 1,679 were drivers under the age of 21. It is important to keep in mind that although 12.2% of drivers involved in alcohol-related crashes were under age 21, this alone does not mean that the younger driver had been consuming alcohol. If the crash involved two or more vehicles and the investigating officer indicated alcohol as a contributing circumstance, all of the drivers involved in the crash would have been considered to be involved in an alcohol-related crash. At the same time, 16 drivers killed in 1997 were under the legal drinking age and showed the presence of alcohol in their system. Twelve of those drivers had blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels greater than 0.10—the legal limit for Indiana. For comparison, in 1996, the corresponding numbers were 18 and 9 drivers, respectively. For all drivers involved in an alcohol-related crash that had a BAC greater than 0.05 in 1997, 10.5% were between 10-20 years of age. Statistics have shown that the majority of alcohol-related crashes occur between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m., and typically over the Friday night-Saturday morning and Saturday night-Sunday morning blocks of that time period.

Jeremy and Tim were two young men whose lives tragically ended before they really began. What could have been done to prevent their untimely deaths? From the crash data, it has been determined that 16-17 year-old drivers are more likely to be involved in a motor vehicle crash, and that these crashes more often than not occur between 3:00 p.m. and 5:59 p.m. Indiana has recently passed a law (effective January 1, 1999) providing for the issuance of a probationary license until the age of 18³. The law stipulates that:

- Drivers with probationary driver's licenses may drive alone. However, if transporting passengers in the first 90 days after receiving a probationary driver's license, someone 21 years of age or older who holds a valid driver's license must be in the front seat;
- Drivers holding probationary licenses may not drive during the state curfew hours (between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. on Saturday or Sunday; after 11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; or before 5 a.m. Monday-Friday) unless accompanied by a parent or guardian, driving to or from lawful employment, a school sanctioned activity or a religious event; and,
- All passengers in a motor vehicle driven by a driver with a probationary driver's license must wear a safety belt.
- A driver with a probationary driver's license may receive an operator's license with full driving privileges at age 18 if, in the preceding 12 months, the driver has not had more than two reportable accidents (regardless of fault), or two traffic convictions or a combination of one each.

Additional research is necessary in order to ascertain whether an additional 90 days of supervised driving will provide the necessary guidance and instruction required to decrease the incidence of crashes among younger drivers. There should be little doubt that had Jeremy had a better appreciation of the risks involved in driving aggressively, and had he been more prepared to drive defensively, the crash that killed both he and Tim may never have happened. The message is clear and simple: the typical young driver requires more knowledge, experience, and understanding of safe driving techniques to decrease the likelihood of his/her involvement in a life-threatening motor vehicle crash. Additionally, teen drivers need to be convinced of the potential dangers they face by consuming alcohol at such a young age, not to mention the added danger involved when they get behind the wheel of a motor vehicle under the influence of any substance.

References

¹ All data, except where otherwise noted, is obtained from the 1997 Indiana State Police Crash Reports and the Fatality Analysis Reporting System, NHTSA.

² *1997 Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*, Federal Bureau of Investigations, Washington, DC: Indiana Arrest Data for Male/Female Juveniles.

³ Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles news release April 14, 1998: Probationary Driver Licensing Explained, <http://www.state.in.us/bmvexpress/info/news/gdlnmprel.html>.